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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000866

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SUBJECT: BOBRUIISK OPPOSITION PREPARES FOR LOCAL ELECTIONS

REF: MINSK 010

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: To gauge the strength of opposition forces ahead of upcoming municipal elections, Poloffs traveled to Bobruisk on July 20, as the southeastern city was preparing for Lukashenko's September annual harvest festival. Although marginalized and weakened, opposition political parties and civil society groups outlined their plans for the local elections and described the politically repressive conditions in which they operate. Bobruisk's mayor and city council members went to great lengths to demonstrate the vitality of the local economy, despite the noticeable inefficiencies of a command economy. Poloffs visited the aging Belshina tire factory that claims to be the largest tire factory that has indirect supply contracts with major firms including Caterpillar. Supervision by local authorities was unobtrusive and even cordial. End Summary.

#### Opposition's Plan for Local Election

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12. (C) Poloffs met with local representatives of opposition political parties and NGOs including: Natalia Adamovich from Young Social Democrats; Taisiya Kabanchuk from the Bobruisk branch of BSDP Gramada; Elena Medvedeva from Perspektiva; Irina Kachan, Deputy Head of the Bobruisk United Civic Party (UCP).

13. (C) The Bobruisk city council (40 members) has only two opposition members. Opposition political parties in Bobruisk plan to participate in the upcoming local elections with almost 20 candidates running. The party representatives that spoke with us did not note any significant coordination with the national opposition coalition, the United Democratic Forces. BSDP Gramada seems most active in the region with around 70 members and three youth clubs. BSDP Gramada plans to field eight candidates for the local council this year and is gathering signatures in an effort to deepen and broaden contact with voters, but the party does not expect to win any seats. The opposition party representatives uniformly reported to Poloffs that during the presidential election campaign authorities routinely detained opposition leaders, seized leaflets, and denied opposition parties legal residences and registration.

#### Civil Society NGOs

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14. (C) NGO activism, particularly youth activism, in Bobruisk is weak, disorganized, and sporadic. Moreover, NGO cooperation with political parties appears limited. "Svaya Sprava" NGO Head and Bobruisk city council member Aleksandr Chigir told Poloffs that the city executive committee created an NGO coordinating council that used to be effective in assisting NGOs but now only monitors and stifles NGO

activities. NGOs are required to submit annual reports to the NGO council. Chigir described how he and another city official began an initiative to receive people once a week and discuss local issues. Chigir has also invited lawyers from the prominent human rights NGOs Vyasna and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee to render legal assistance to the population with housing services, labor issues, and human rights violations.

15. (C) Lyudmila Kokosh from the Bobruisk Organization of Working Women (BOWW) claimed that BOWW has not experienced any pressure and has received support from the local government. The organization is not involved in any political activities, but was able to set up a number of discussion roundtables on women's issues before the presidential elections. She noted that other NGOs and governmental officials participated. (Note: Kokosh, who clearly felt ill-at-ease, was whispering to Poloffs even as she denied problems with authorities.)

#### Independent Media

16. (C) Poloffs also met with independent journalists Anatoly Sanotenko, publisher of the "Bobruisk Courier," Bobruisk's largest newspaper, and Andrey Shobin, correspondent from "Vecherniy Bobruisk," a smaller newspaper with eight correspondents. Both newspapers are included in the Belpochta's catalogue and are available for sale at Belsoyuzpechat kiosks. However, Sanotenko reported that local officials use economic instruments, such as restrictions on advertisements and subscriptions for businesses, to keep the newspaper in a perpetual state of economic flux.

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17. (C) According to Shobin, independent journalists are banned from official press conferences, local political, cultural, and sports events, and thus not able to receive information from official sources. Nevertheless, the Courier still publishes articles on the activities of local NGOs, registered political parties, and election campaigns.

#### Bobruisk's Economy

18. (C) Bobruisk Mayor Mikhail Bondarenko painted an optimistic social and economic picture of Bobruisk. He maintained that Bobruisk has a low unemployment rate of 1.8 percent, a high economic growth rate, and no significant health problems. As proof of economic success, the mayor cited three major private enterprises in Bobruisk that collectively employ 6,000 people, including the textiles company "Salyanik," which until recently had a contract with Nike. However, he noted that the government must keep a hand in business matters because the "Slavic mentality cannot comprehend laws of business." He referenced a recent case in which authorities liquidated an unprofitable company and found employment in other businesses for the 900 workers.

19. (C) Poloffs toured the production facilities of "Belshina," a joint stock company which purports to operate the largest tire factory in Europe and one of the largest such factories in world. Belshina employs between 12,000 and 13,000 residents, and the average salary is USD 500 per month (roughly twice the national average monthly salary). Belashina claims to compete for the same market share as Goodyear and Michelin. Belshina's chief engineer Vasiliy Gushcha asserted that one-third of its products are consumed in the domestic market, one-third in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the remaining third are exported. He noted Belashina had produced 1,300 tires for U.S. company Caterpillar last year but carefully avoided discussing any future contracts with the company (reftel). Poloff noticed the equipment looked at least 20 to 30 years old and asked

two guides about safety problems and injuries. One failed to answer, and the other responded, "There have been problems."

#### Bobruisk Officials Ready for Lukashenko's Harvest Festival

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¶10. (C) Bobruisk is preparing for "Dazhynky," a harvest festival held in a different region of Belarus every September. Although Dazhynky has the trappings of a traditional festival, its present form is a GOB creation intended to laud the economic policies of the Lukashenko regime. City officials told Poloffs that GOB promised Bobruisk USD 280,000 for Dazhynky, but had only received USD 19,000. These funds include money from national and local budgets and "donations" from local businesses and people's salaries. Three fundraisers called "subotniki" have been held with proceeds earmarked the Dazhynky fund. Opposition leaders told Poloffs that residents are forced to work the subotniki and their "donations" to the festival fund are automatically garnished from their paychecks.

#### Authorities Cordially Receive Poloffs

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¶11. (C) The reception of Poloffs in Bobruisk was an atypical experience for Emboffs traveling to the regions. The mayor cordially welcomed Poloffs over coffee at the local municipal building. Local authorities made no effort to interfere with Poloffs' meetings with opposition activists and independent media and permitted Poloffs to enter and leave Bobruisk without escort.

#### Comment

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¶12. (C) The cordial reception in Bobruisk served as a thin veneer for the local government's typical harassment of opposition and civil society activists. Our regional trips to Bobruisk and elsewhere outside of Minsk send an important signal of support and encouragement to regional opposition activists as they prepare for the upcoming local elections in the face of enormous GOB repression, and they alert the regime that the USG is closely monitoring its activities in areas well beyond the capital.

Moore